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AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE IMPACT ON AIR FORCE OFFICER RETENTION

by

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Preface

This research idea grew out of a personal need I have had to manage over the years as a married military officer with children. The careful balance I have developed between my career and family is one that has taken a lot of hard work, a lot of planning, and often sacrifices that are made either regarding my career or my family. It was a natural progression to look deeper into the subject to try to improve the situation for people of similar circumstances.

I would like to acknowledge Major Marlin Moore, my faculty research advisor, for his support and subject expertise. I would also like to thank many others too numerous to name who provided encouragement to me in researching this subject. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for his support for this project and all the other times I've burned the midnight oil for my career.

Abstract

Retention is a primary concern for the U.S. Air Force today, and the Air Force needs to explore all avenues of retention for its officers. The Air Force should carefully evaluate the impact of changing demographics on its officer retention. A review of the demographic studies performed by the Air Force Chaplain Office in the early 1980s and the National Families and Work Institute in 1997 reflect the trend towards an increasing concern for a work/life balance among both military members and their civilian counterparts. As the labor shortage for professional skills continues, the Air Force must look for innovative ways to retain its officers. The private sector leads the way with creative programs that are diversified enough to attract both the career professionals who aspire to be a CEO one day, and the career-family professionals who more highly value the balance of a strong family and successful career. Many of the programs begun by private industry are viable options for the Air Force; it only depends on how high a priority the Air Force places on retaining its professional corps. The Air Force should also consider adopting family support programs implemented by other armed forces, such as the Royal Australian Air Force. Improving family support programs is an important step in modifying the current career progression plan for officers. Implementing a dual-track career progression program will allow officers to choose options that provide a better career/family balance without sacrificing certain career success. This career flexibility, which has already proven successful in the private sector, will be one more strong factor in retaining quality officers.

Part 1

Background

We will never fix our retention problems until we can guarantee each and every one of our men and women a reasonable quality of life during peacetime. They should be able to raise a family, participate in community affairs, pursue additional education; in short, they should be able to have a personal life.

— F. Whitten Peters, Secretary of the Air Force

Introduction and Problem Definition

Retention is one of the primary topics of conversation around the armed services these days, and for good reason. The Air Force is suffering from reduced recruiting and retention due to a number of contributing factors, some of which have been identified as the military to civilian pay gap, the force drawdown, increased OPSTEMPO, and changing values.¹ Most servicemen and women have named OPSTEMPO as the primary reason for separating.² However, the Air Force must also contend with other external influences, such as the shift in perspectives of its members regarding their military career. This shift in perspective is taking place across society, and sociologists identify this shift as one characteristic of Generation X. One distinguishing characteristic of Generation X adults is their movement back toward religion and family-oriented goals. A recent poll suggested found that the highest priority for young adults is building a strong family.³ For many people in their twenties and thirties, (who comprise the junior and middle management layers of the Air Force), their career is no longer the paramount

consideration.⁴ Career must be balanced with family time. This is one of the “pull” factors that, when combined with the “push” factors of such things as OPSTEMPO, reduced benefits, and a pay gap, has an effect on the Air Force’s ability to retain quality officers. However, in recent years, the Air Force has recognized this shift toward family concerns, and has made numerous efforts to improve family support with the hope of retaining quality personnel.

Thesis

Just as retention has been aided in the past by the adoption of family support initiatives, such as improved childcare centers and the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), the Air Force should continue to expand its family support efforts. One such effort has an opportunity to improve quality of life for both military officers and their families. This initiative, patterned after the Phoenix Aviator program for pilots, would allow officers preferring a more balanced career/family approach to progress successfully until retirement. This career track would allow for a maximum progression to O-5 or O-6. The Phoenix Aviator program allows those pilots who only want to fly (and who do not wish to progress to flag officer rank), to still have a viable career until retirement.⁵ A similar program for non-rated officers would enable them to choose between a “command” track and a “career” track. As the number of officers who are part of Generation X and younger move up the ranks, changing values, such as a stronger desire to balance career and family, will highlight the differences in priorities between them and their “Baby Boomer” bosses.

The Air Force should implement a dual-track career program for its officers as a means of satisfying the needs of today’s generation that want a balance of career and family. This allows them to feel successful in a career while also meeting the needs of their family. As the composition of the Air Force shifts towards more married couples, more single parents, and also

more dual-military or dual-career couples,⁶ the Air Force cannot afford to ignore their needs. As the private sector touts its successes with versatile career programs for employees, the “pull” may be stronger than ever for Air Force officers to leave the military. To enhance recruitment efforts and to prevent a further erosion in retention rates, and possibly aid recruitment, the Air Force should implement a versatile career program, consisting of two distinct career paths for its officers. While such a two-track system exists informally now, a full endorsed and officially sanctioned program would be beneficial both for the Air Force and its volunteer force.

Methodology

This paper will first provide a historical review of demographic studies conducted in the Air Force and in the private sector, emphasizing the impact on the labor market. Next, this paper will provide a comparison of career incentives and support programs the private sector has adopted to cope with a tight labor market. Finally, the paper will propose ways the Air Force could aid retention and positively support its officers by implementing quality of life programs.

Notes

¹Patrick Malackowski, Keesey Miller, “Retention Problems and the USAF Approach”, 5.

²Ibid, 10.

³Ted Halstead, “A Politics for Generation X”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284, no. 2 (Aug 99).

⁴Dennis K. Orthner, *Families in Blue: A Study of Married and Single Parent Families in the U.S. Air Force* (Office of the Chief of Chaplains, USAF, 1980),15.

⁵“Phoenix Aviator 20 Participation Increases”, *Air Force News*, 29 Oct 1998.

⁶Dennis K. Orthner, *Families in Blue: A Study of Married and Single Parent Families in the U.S. Air Force* (Office of the Chief of Chaplains, USAF, 1980),9.

Part 2

Historical Review

There is nothing permanent except change.

— Heraclitus (ca. 540-ca.480 B.C.)

Why Study Demographics?

Studying changes in demographics is necessary to better predict future trends impacting military recruitment and retention. Demography is a broad social science discipline concerned with the study of human population characteristics. “Demographers deal with the collection, presentation and analysis of data relating to the basic life-cycle events and experiences of people: birth, marriage, divorce, household and family formation, employment, aging, migration and death. The discipline emphasizes empirical investigation of population processes, including the conceptualization and measurement of these processes and the study of their determinants and consequences.”¹ Studying demographics in the past has provided coverage of broad topical studies of human resources: health and morbidity; family systems and family structure; the role of women; the value of children; and the social, cultural, and institutional context of demographic change. To maintain relevance, this paper will utilize recent demographic information only to illustrate trends and changes affecting the labor market. It is essential to study not only the subset of Air Force demographics, but also to understand their relationship to broader societal characteristics.

Military Demographic Studies

A comprehensive military demographic study performed for the Air Force Chaplain Service in 1980 identified some interesting shifts in Air Force family views. The study reflected changes in attitudes toward parenting roles, family leadership, household responsibilities, and spousal employment.² The study, which reflected attitudes from interviews with 763 married Air Force members, spouses and single parents, also documented differences changes in the way couples view traditional values of husband leadership, separate family responsibilities, and the primacy of motherhood for women and work for men.³ Although one-third of the families interviewed still believed more traditional family values, another third rejected these values, and one-third held contrasting values. Of those families with contrasting views, they were almost equally divided between (a) husbands holding the traditional values while wives did not, and (b) wives holding the traditional values while husbands did not.

A Generation Difference

This movement away from traditional family values should come as no surprise. This is largely a generational difference. Most of the older couples interviewed for the AF study, particularly where the husband held senior rank, still believed in the traditional family roles. However, the younger families were more likely to espouse non-traditional family values. This 1980 finding clearly documented the fact that young people entering the service had different expectations from the Air Force than those recruited a decade or so earlier. The younger generation is not as willing to sacrifice the interests of their family to have an Air Force career as were their predecessors. The implications of the study are that the younger Air Force members

are seeking a more balanced approach between their work and family responsibilities and senior leaders need to understand the different values. Placing unreasonable demands on these younger members may jeopardize their commitment to remain in the Air Force.⁴

A Continuing Trend: Shifting Family Values

A follow-on study to the 1980 *Air Force Families in Blue* was the 1982 study titled *Families in Blue, Phase II: Insights from Air Force Families in the Pacific*. While this study was limited to PACAF families, the number interviewed was larger - 1,254 married members, spouses, and single parents.⁵ The authors of this study also compared PACAF demographics and study results to comparable families in CONUS and USAFE, and found there were no significant differences among the three groups. Therefore, the sample data in the PACAF report could reasonably be generalized to the Air Force at large.

The 1982 PACAF study reflected the same shifts occurring in how families view the traditional roles of the husband, wife, and traditional family responsibilities. About one-half of the survey participants still subscribed to traditional values such as husband leadership, separate member family responsibilities, and the primacy of motherhood for women and work for men. The other fifty percent rejected these traditional values, and the variable that discriminated the two groups was age.⁶ The findings were similar to the 1980 study: the younger Air Force members adhered more to the nontraditional family values in which family responsibilities are often shared and the husband and wife have a balanced partnership in the marriage. The conclusion one could draw from this trend towards egalitarian marriages is that dual-career households are now more widely acceptable to military families and are becoming more common.

Career Concerns Vs Family Roles

Just as in the 1980 study, couples that held opposite views on the family roles experienced the most stress. The PACAF study revealed that of these contrasting marriages, the families experiencing the most difficulties were the ones who were in their mid-career stage, and who felt caught by the competing demands of the two careers. In most cases, the wives felt they could no longer commit to the traditional dependent wife role, while the husbands felt they had to dedicate themselves to their career in order to advance.⁷ The conflict occurred because the husbands felt they needed to do all the right things to ensure career success, which may conflict with their spouse's ability to pursue a viable career. While this feeling of needing to devote oneself to one's career can be felt by all officers, it is magnified when both husband and wife are military members.

Dual-Military Families

The career concerns of these dual-military couples reaches a culminating point around the mid-career point, when the decision to stay until retirement is pondered. Based on Air Force Personnel Center historical data from 1989, approximately 6.5% of Air Force officers were married to other military members; however, this same source reported that over 9% of Air Force officers were married to other active duty members in 1998.⁸ The increase in dual-career couples, especially dual-*military* career couples creates a situation in which a greater percentage of Air Force members will reach the point where one or both members may have to choose to leave the military due to conflicting career priorities. The percentage approaches 10% of the officer force, which has a greater impact on overall officer retention rates as these couples approach their mid-career point and must face some of the conflicts between traditional/non-traditional family values. They must also evaluate the impact that a demanding Air Force

environment has on their children. These conflicts have usually been prevalent among the female officers who desire both a family and a career, but the characteristics of Generation X suggest that both male and females are increasingly concerned about the career/family balance.

Career/Family Conflicts

These concerns about future conflicts between career and family were investigated in a 1986 study conducted on the first female graduates of the Air Force Academy (Class of 1980). Family concerns were the main factor determining whether the female officer continued her military career.⁹ These women indicated that the major factor affecting their career decision-making process was their concerns about balancing family responsibilities and military duties. Most did not consider it possible to maintain a military career while raising a family. In 1986, at the time of the study, the female graduates of the AFA Class of 1980 were leaving the military at a rate of 21.1% versus 10.4% for the males in their cohort.¹⁰ Given the increased OPSTEMPO, these same female officers would probably have even greater concerns today regarding a family/career balance.

The increased OPSTEMPO has affected all active duty members, and dual-service couples stand the chance of feeling the impact more. The force drawdown the Air Force has endured since 1986 has left the active duty force at 40% less personnel than pre-1986. However, the deployed personnel support for military operations other than war has *increased* nearly fivefold.¹¹ The Air Force averaged about 3,500 personnel per day deployed for contingencies in 1986, but by 1998 that number grew to 16,600. At the midpoint of FY99, the average over the past twelve months for deployed personnel reflected over 17,000 daily.¹² This data, tracked by the Air Force Personnel Center, indicates a trend towards more time away from home supporting military operations. Making an effort to improve retention, the Air Force Chief of Staff invoked

a policy limiting TDY days to 120 days within a 12-month period.¹³ Even with this policy in effect, 23% of combat systems personnel exceeded the limit in 1998 with an average of 142 days.¹⁴ While any military family experiences the separation caused by frequent deployments, the dual-military families are disrupted more often due to both members' TDY responsibilities. These disruptions affect the family/career balance desired by the young Generation X'ers of the military. Similar trends and concerns in society as a whole has prompted private corporations to conduct studies and take actions as they endeavor to retain quality professionals.

Societal Demographic Studies

One of the more recent demographic studies published is *The 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce*,¹⁵ which described a number of demographic trends. These trends were calculated by comparing the data to similar data collected in 1992, and also by comparing data published in the 1977 Labor Department *Quality of Employment Survey*.¹⁶ This study addressed contemporary issues in the private labor market, such as the relationship between workers' lives on and off the job, changes in the way workers consider work and their personal lives, and productive employment arrangements for both employer and employee.

Just as was reported in the 1980 *Families in Blue* survey, the 1997 study provided more recent evidence of the trend towards more working couples and their corresponding greater family needs. Over the last two decades, the proportion of dual-income families has increased from 66% to 78%, and in 75% of those households, both partners worked full-time. Additionally, of those dual-income marriages in 1997, 67% reported having children as compared with 49% in 1977.¹⁷ Of particular interest to this research is the study's findings that the roles of the men and women are converging. The study found that while more women are working outside the home than in the past, time spent with their children remained constant, but

time spent doing household chores has decreased. Fathers, however, have increased the time spent with their children and increased the time they spend doing household chores. This suggests that children get more time with their parents, mainly due to an increased involvement from the father. Although this is a positive trend, the negative aspect is that women, due to increased work hours and static parenting time commitments, have even less personal time. This is a wellness issue that should be monitored in the future. Men, on the other hand, while having less time for themselves than in the past, still enjoy more personal time than women, but have increased their roles in the household.¹⁸ These trends reflect the overall demographic changes of converging family roles and a better work/family balance. In fact, the 1997 study found that although children of working families are getting more parental time than in the past, 70% of the parents interviewed felt they do not have enough time for their children.¹⁹ This suggests that increased time does not equal increased satisfaction, which is a key quality of life issue, and is a concern for the young working families.

The Career Habits of Generation X

These young workers, namely Generation X'ers (workers from 18 - 32 years old in 1997), are better educated, more diverse, and, contrary to popular media, are not a bunch of slackers.²⁰ The young workers of today spend an average of 44 hours working, but are typically paid for only 38 hours. Among employees working 20 or more hours per week, total paid and unpaid hours worked have increased from 43.6 hours in 1977 to 47.1 hours in 1997.²¹ In that same time period, men's total work hours have increased from 47.1 hours to 49.9 hours (an increase of 2.8 hours), and women's total work hours have increased from 39 hours to 44 hours (an increased of 5 hours per week). The category of employees who work the longest hours are men with children under 18. These fathers work an average of 50.9 hours, where other men work about 48

hours per week. In contrast, women with children under 18 work fewer hours (41.4 hours) than other women (43.4 hours).²² Overall, the time dedicated to work has increased over the past 20 years.

The 1997 study, especially when compared to the 1977 study, reflects that more and more families have two working parents, who work longer hours, spend more time with their children, and would like to spend even more time with their children. This is only a portion of the characteristics describing Generation X'ers, but it highlights contemporary employment issues faced by both the private sector and the military. These Generation X'ers, who not only make up a large portion of the private labor market supply, comprise approximately 50% of our officer corps. Within this same relative age group, O-1 through O-3, 32% of the officers have children.²³

The demographic studies conducted both in the Air Force and in the private sector reflect the desire of dual-income families to move towards more balance between work and home obligations. While the Air Force has made some accommodations in this area, the private sector has had more flexibility to adapt to these changing demographics. The next section will highlight a number of the initiatives undertaken by private industry and the military organizations of foreign countries.

Notes

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¹⁷Ibid, 2.

¹⁸Ibid, 5.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid, 14.

²¹Ibid, 8.

²²Ibid, 9.

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Part 3

Balancing Work/Life Programs

In this age of labor shortages and cutthroat competition, companies have learned they must respond to the needs of the changing workforce - or else.

— *Working Mother* magazine

What the Private Sector is Doing

National Awakening

Across the spectrum of private industry, companies of all shapes and sizes are taking seriously the trends toward balancing work and family. In fact, even the terminology on their recruiting brochures reflects those changes. Many companies now have a special section called “Work/Life Balance,” in which they highlight the options available to potential employees regarding work routines and leave programs. At the national level, the government passed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993. This law required most employers to allow employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for certain family health situations.¹ Additional improvements have been recently initiated by the federal government and support agencies to provide alternate means of income for lower-income families taking unpaid leave under FMLA. The Commission on Family and Medical Leave published a report to Congress in 1996 titled *A Workable Balance: Commission to Congress on Family and Medical Leave Policies (1993 - 1996)*. The summarized findings of the report showed the FMLA was a success

in that it “had a positive impact on employees overall.” It has succeeded in replacing the piecemeal system of voluntary employer leave policies and state leave statutes with a more consistent and uniform standard. The FMLA, with its signature features of guaranteed job protection and maintenance of job benefits “is a significant step in helping a larger cross-section of Americans meet their medical and family caregiving needs while still maintaining their jobs and their economic security - achieving the workable balance intended by Congress.”² The FMLA helped many private employers and American workers to realize they could have it better.

Improved Benefits

In the past decade many employers have improved their employee benefits to include better leave and flexible work schedules. Microsoft has demonstrated its leadership in industry through its diverse and family-friendly programs. Microsoft has an extensive employee program, where it offers not just full coverage health plans, but also eight weeks of paid maternity leave for new mothers, four weeks of paid Infant Care leave, and for fathers, four weeks of paid paternity leave, with the option to take additional unpaid leave. Microsoft also reaches out to ease other home life concerns, such as providing a free health club membership, counseling services, adoption financial assistance, and many more programs. Realizing that a positive organizational climate is key to overall employee satisfaction, Microsoft leads the way with providing free professional development, product discounts, workplace ergonomics consultation, and free beverages while at work!³ While Microsoft is a recent example of a company with programs, others experimented with an enhanced employee package long ago.

One of the first companies to offer flexible work hours, as far back as 1967, was Hewlett Packard (HP).⁴ HP offers strong work/life balance options for its employees; in fact over 15% of

its employees use flexible work arrangements such as part-time, telecommuting, job-shares, and variable work schedules. Hewlett-Packard also provides a variety of dependent care resources for its employees, helping them tend to their responsibilities for children, elders, or those with disabilities.⁵

Evaluating Companies for Work/Life Balances

A good source for identifying companies striving to enhance family work/life balances is *Working Mother* magazine. This periodical provides contemporary evaluations of family-friendly companies not only for working mothers, but also for working parents in general. In their annual report titled the “100 Best Companies,” *Working Mother* annually assesses the family friendly programs of private companies, and scores six comprehensive variables: parental leave, flexible work schedules, childcare, performance-based salary schedules, women advancement, and pay.

The first factor is Leave for New Parents, assessed as job-guaranteed time off for childbirth, pay policy during leave for new moms, phase-back program for new moms, lactation program, paternity program, and adoption aid. The second factor is Flexibility, consisting of flextime, compressed workweeks, job sharing, manager pay tied to flex use, work at home, work flexibility training for managers, and part time options. Another factor that is high on the list for most working parents is the company’s Child Care program, which *Working Mother* assesses as on-site and/or near-site centers, network of family childcare homes, dependent care fund, childcare options and fee subsidies, pretax set-asides, resource and referral for childcare services, and the company’s participation in the American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care. The fourth factor judged by the magazine is Work/Life, consisting of manager pay tied to employee satisfaction, employee surveys, manager training, task for on work/life issues, and

elder care resource and referral. The last two categories assessed by *Working Mother* are not as pertinent to this research discussion, but are of interest to many potential employees: Advancing Women, and Pay.⁶

One company rated in the top ten percent (of *Working Mother's* best 100 companies for 1999) is the Bank of America. This company gives up to 26 weeks off for childbirth and has excellent flexible work programs and dependent care programs.⁷ IBM, also ranked in the top ten percent by *Working Mother* for 12 of the 14 years the "100 Best" list has been published, continues to trailblaze new and innovative work/family programs. IBM tops the list for its childbirth leave program, which offers mothers and fathers up to three years of job-guaranteed time off. It is working hard to keep up with its mission stated in 1998, "to become the premier global employer for working mothers".⁸ In fact, it assesses dependent care needs not only for its US based employees, but also in 11 other countries.

As *Working Mother* assessed the 1999 list, it noted the common traits of the "100 Best" companies. These companies understand the power of flexibility by offering flextime and other alternatives such as telecommuting and job sharing. They also listen to their employees. 95% of the companies survey their employees on work/life topics and most of those have a work/life task force to tackle the issues.⁹ Examples are additions of lactation rooms, additional childcare subsidies, formal policies on flextime; all are based on feedback derived from the employees' surveys.¹⁰ The companies communicate well not only by publicizing their family friendly programs, but also by selling them to the employees. "Companies must sell employees on these programs and keep mommy-track stigmas from tainting them, so they're finding creative, clever ways to market their offerings."¹¹

Unexpected Gains

Just as a company enjoys an unexpectedly higher profit, the companies who implement family-friendly initiatives enjoy the benefits returned to them. A comprehensive resource and referral program initiated at Prudential saved them over \$7 million in reduced absenteeism and turnover. CIGNA, another insurance giant, reported its new lactation program reduced the time away from work by new mothers by 27%. The “100 Best” companies have learned the power of work/life benefits on their bottom line. They understand the return on investment they can get by being proactive.¹²

Being proactive towards family friendly programs is not limited only to private industry, although they have more flexibility to enact new programs. One of our allied military forces has been very proactive in maintaining a quality force through strong family support programs.

The Family Friendly RAAF

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), although a much smaller force than our U.S Air Force, offers a number of proactive family support programs. It would probably rate very high on the *Working Mother* rating scale, especially for a force whose budget is controlled by another agency. Who controls the budget doesn't stop the RAAF from supporting its troops. According to SqLdr David Thiele, an active duty RAAF member, the RAAF has implemented many family support programs over the years that aid in retention of their quality members.¹³

The RAAF has a very strong maternity leave program -- three months paid leave, and up to one year unpaid maternity leave. The service also established a paternity leave program of five days for new fathers. The most modern program it has introduced is Carer's Leave, where a serving member can take up to five days off to take care of an ill family member. This leave does not count against the member's normal recreation leave or personal sick leave. In addition,

commanders are very flexible regarding family matters, so that members often can resolve family matters without using their leave.¹⁴

Unlike most civilian companies, the military has unique requirements that often require their members to be separated from their families. To ease the strain of this occurring within a dual-military family, the RAAF has a special Leave Without Pay Accompanying Serving Member (LWOPASM) program. In this program, if one military member gets assigned to a base and the other military spouse cannot get an assignment there also, the other military spouse can request LWOPASM. This is essentially an open-ended leave of absence. The situation doesn't necessarily mean the non-working spouse has to stay unemployed. Their name will go in a register and be considered for part or full time work if positions become available. Most bases even have a pool of funds to purchase additional labor utilizing the LWOPASM personnel in the area.¹⁵

The RAAF also rewards its long-serving members with additional leave entitlements after a certain period of service. After ten years of service, a member is entitled to three months leave. This leave can either be taken at full pay, meaning three months worth, or at half pay, where the member can take six months of leave and receive half pay. Every five years after the ten-year mark, a serving member gets an additional six weeks. This accrues to six months leave by the time a member reaches the twenty-year point. To capitalize on this benefit, members considering retirement often choose to take the six months pay at half pay, giving them twelve months actual leave. They go to work for another employer, and if they like it, proceed with retirement. If they don't, they finish their twelve months and return to service.

The latest program the RAAF is introducing to meet the needs of the changing workforce is starting a 'part time' employment option. In this program, active duty members resign their

commission and join the active reserve, filling part time positions. According to SqLdr Thiele, RAAF, this program is mainly aimed at retaining their female members who have children and prefer a part time position.¹⁶

Notes

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⁷ Cartwright, Catherine. “100 Best Companies for Working Mothers”, February 2000,n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 February 2000. Available from <http://workingmother.com/100best/companies/bofa.html>.

⁸ Cartwright, Catherine. “IBM: 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers”, February 2000,n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 February 2000. Available from <http://workingmother.com/100best/companies/ibm.html>.

⁹ Cartwright, Catherine. “100 Best Companies for Working Mothers”, February 2000,n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 February 2000. Available from <http://workingmother.com/100best/companies/index.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with SqLdr David Theile, RAAF, ACSC Student, Class 2000, 8 Dec 99

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Part 4

Conclusions

Our ability to meet the challenges of the future is predicated on recruiting and retaining high caliber men and women, managing them with sound personnel management policies and practices.

— Lt Gen Michael D. McGinty

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, reviewing the private sector programs and other military forces' programs suggests our military should also heed the effects of demographic trends and initiate programs to improve the family/career balance desired by Generation X officers. In previous decades, when the Baby Boomer generation was the mainstay of the workforce, both the private sector and the military operated on an "up or out" policy. In other words, an employee needed to show career progression, obtaining the "appropriate" check marks on their performance report, in order to reach the goal of retirement. These policies placed undue stress on those who, for various reasons, couldn't or wouldn't meet the specified gates. Eventually, seeing the handwriting on the wall, these highly productive employees often chose to separate from their company and moved on to a different company or sought a less time-consuming career.

Due to the large labor pool at the time, employers, including the military, didn't feel a need to accommodate these types of employees, and often considered them as lacking initiative for not

adhering to the one path to success. Over the last two decades, the growing economy has created a tighter labor pool.

At the same time, the Baby Boomer generation passed the torch as the mainstay of the workforce to Generation X'ers. Although this generation views work as important, they don't see it as the road to happiness. Rather, they view work as a means to the end -- to afford the comforts of life and to provide for their family. This is a subtle difference between how Baby Boomers view employment and Generation X'ers view employment. The labor shortage has caused companies to take notice, and answer the cries, or rather demand, of this generation that they want more control over the circumstances of their employment. Rather than highly valuing their career progression at any price, many want success that improves their job satisfaction, but still provides them time for their family priorities.

Can such a philosophy exist in a military environment that values "service before self?" How can the Air Force prepare its officers to lead the Air Force if not all officers desire the top rung? The philosophy actually does exist now, but is only whispered in small circles by junior and mid-level officers. These officers, the Generation X group, are looking outward, beyond the Air Force's low retention problems, and carefully considering what they see in their future. Many are more realistic, and only "play the game" of receiving the appropriate check marks to satisfy their superiors. Some of these officers may be biding their time until they complete their commitment. Others continue until the crucial first promotion board, the Major board, at which time they choose to separate. The Air Force may be losing high quality people because different career options were not available.

When a company has limited career advancement opportunities, a portion of the employees will leave before they invest a large amount of time in the organization. This was the case with

Deloitte & Touche, who surveyed the employees who left to find out their reasons for leaving.¹ The company observed that a large number of their female professionals were leaving, but instead of inferring their reasons for leaving, the company actively investigated the problem. What they discovered was that these women left not for motherhood or other family reasons, but because of limited advancement opportunities and flexible career options. The restrictive work environment was their cause for flight.

For many Air officers, contributing factors that make the Air Force environment less conducive to families cause them to separate and look for more flexible employment. For those officers who enjoy their particular career field so much they don't want to branch out to fulfill the expected promotion wickets, they may choose to separate. The Air Force saw this happening with some of its pilots. In a time where every person with wings was needed to fill a cockpit, the Air Force couldn't afford to ignore the warning signs as evidenced by the throngs of separating pilots. To satisfy their needs, the Phoenix Aviator program was born.

This program allows pilots in the last years of their career to fly in Air Force cockpits. The Air Force provides assistance for their follow-on career with civilian airline companies. This program helps retain the pilots until the twenty-year point. The pilot who signs up for this program has made a career decision to forego the command/leadership track that might possibly take him/her to the general officer rank. While the program has been in existence too little time to fully assess its impact, enrollment has increased each year.² Now that the Air Force has opened the door to flexible career paths for the pilots, it is only a matter of time before it should consider doing the same for the non-rated officers.

Disadvantages to a Dual-Track Career Program

While the civilian corporate experience with dual-track programs has been generally positive, a similar program in a military organization may be more complicated to implement. This proposal has not been formally made, so no formal objections have yet surfaced. However, discussions may focus on the disadvantages to the program for the following reasons: conflict with our military's mission, limited financial resources, inconvenience to others, and the impact on the military organization.

Most of the arguments for any type of career path (other than for the traditional path to command) usually focus on the military's purpose, which is to fight our nation's wars. With this purpose in mind, naysayers suggest that all officers need to be prepared to command, and adequate preparation comes only from following the suggested career path. However, while this argument may be accurate for certain operational career fields and certain support fields, the level of command varies across Air Force specialty codes, as does the preparation and responsibility assumed for the different jobs. Non-line officers are an example of how the Air Force has recognized their distinct contributions to the military mission, but aren't expected to follow the single path to success. Line officers such as scientists and engineers struggle with the single career path expectations while simultaneously seeking further technical competency recognition expected by their civilian counterparts.³

Additional reasons for opposing a dual-track system might concern the lack of resources. Any type of new career program would create additional costs, not only in management of the program, but possibly in personnel costs. However, this may be a small cost to pay considering the number of officers it would positively affect, especially when contrasted with the money saved in training and retention of experienced personnel. A dual-track program that included family-friendly options similar to those offered by the RAAF or private corporations could also

create some inconveniences for those not utilizing the program. Those who feel inconvenienced might include those pursuing the command track. Their benefits will come later in the way of promotions and higher pay, while those in the alternative family-friendly track have already made the determination they will sacrifice a certain level of success in order to have more family time. For those officers who utilize the “family friendly” track, depending on the extent to which the military implements such a program, opponents could argue the military organization is negatively impacted. The impact may be in the way an extended absence or alternative work schedule would make the military member be less available for deployments or special duties. A final, more philosophical argument is that any other career program could shift the Air Force’s focus to a more corporate nature, as the Air Force seeks to retain employees by offering more benefits. This argument isn’t really valid, since the Air Force has been doing that since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force. Through the years, as the labor market has fluctuated, the Air Force has had to react accordingly to retain quality personnel. The changing demographics cited earlier in this paper are just a further reflection of how the Air Force needs to further adapt itself to provide for the needs of its employees and to remain competitive in the job market.

Recommendations

A Dual-Track System for Nonrated Officers

Many senior leaders of the Baby Boomer generation argue that officers should demonstrate leadership by taking challenging opportunities outside their field of expertise. This career broadening experience would presumably be useful training for future command positions. These senior leaders make the assumption that every officer aspires to be a commander. However, many officers prefer leadership positions a level below the command positions. They

desire to stay within their technical field of expertise (just as some pilots prefer only to fly), and understand how their decision may affect their promotion potential. The Generation X officers see the sacrifices one must make to become a commander, and many are not willing to endure the sacrifices. On the other hand, there are plenty of officers who do desire such a command track, and so the Air Force shouldn't find itself in need of officers to fill those roles.

Career Path Guide Revision

One way to design such a career option is to lay out both paths early on in the *Officer Career Path Guide* published for each officer career field.⁴ This same information on the single-track approach can be found right now in the officer career guide, but the advice given to officers is that they need to fulfill all the roles that will lead them to command.⁵ The lack of mentoring that occurs for officers who do not desire the command track usually leaves them to sort out their career options for themselves. If an officer only believed it was organizationally acceptable to be a technical leader, the Air Force may be able to retain more quality officers.

Just as private industry has realized, many working professionals feel strongly about balancing their family needs with their career, and are willing to sacrifice the top rung of the corporate ladder. These employees are still highly productive, motivated individuals, and private industry has realized that over the past two decades. The Air Force has long since recognized those traits in its enlisted force. The Air Force method of promoting enlisted members up to the E-7 level allows enlisted members to achieve a better balance between family/work, and not necessarily incur the frequent moves and continual job changes that E-8 and E-9 enlisted members or many officers routinely experience. The Air Force should also implement a dual-track career program for its officers that still recognizes potential for higher promotions yet provides greater flexibility for career/family balance.

Additional Initiatives

Within the implementation of such a dual-track system, the Air Force should implement some of the work/life balance programs installed within the private sector. Many non-rated career fields can have flexible work programs without impacting mission readiness. Flextime, partial telecommute schedules, or even part-time positions may be considerations for the future. While these initiatives might be limited to a peacetime setting, most military people appear to understand that in wartime one must be more flexible and be prepared to deploy or work unusual schedules.

The Air Force should also look at expanding its Family Support program to include some of the private sector initiatives. Dependent care is now expanding to include elder care, as more of the Baby Boomer generation is aging and young families are supporting their dependent relatives. Improving childcare programs should also be evaluated by the Air Force. Just as the private sector has done, improved on-site childcare facilities and expanded in-home day care is a growing concern for active duty officers. One private company also began a nanny-screening program to assist its professionals seeking nanny care. As the percentage of more working military couples and more dual-military and single military parents increases, the Air Force will be pressured to improve the family support programs. Some programs are less costly than others, but every little bit goes a long way when an officer is considering separation from the Air Force.

The Air Force should carefully evaluate and act on the impact that changing demographics has on its officer retention. As the labor shortage for professional skills continues, the Air Force must look for innovative ways to retain its officers. The private sector is leading the way with creative programs that are diversified enough to attract both the career professionals who aspire to be CEO one day, and the career-family professionals who care more for the balanced life of a

strong family and successful career. Many of the programs begun by private industry are viable options for the Air Force; it only depends on how high a priority the Air Force places on retaining its professional corps. For most officers, job satisfaction is still high, but the limited support programs offer too many incentives to look elsewhere for employment.

Notes

¹ Lisa Trimberger, "Deloitte & Touche: Retaining Women Means Success", *HR Focus*, Nov 98, Vol. 75 Issue 11, 7.

² "Phoenix Aviator 20 Participation Increases", Air Force News, 29 Oct 1998.

³ Robert H. Cohn, "Scientist and Engineer Career Patterns for Air Force Civilians and Officers", Research Report no. (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command Staff College, 1999), 9-10.

⁴ *Officer Career Path Guide*, March 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 9 March 2000. Available from <http://afas.afpc.randolph.af.mil/ofcr-cpguide>.

⁵ Ibid.

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